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The Politics of Craft

Kristina Niedderer and Katherine Townsend

The crafts rarely garner political attention or are seen as a political force, save perhaps for the writings and historical accounts of the Arts and Crafts movement in the context of the Industrial Revolution or for the preservation efforts of endangered indigenous people's artefacts (and possibly skills). However, craft – in its quiet and plodding, sometimes serious and sometimes naïvely cheerful, way – has long been connected with political change in various ways.

In pre-industrial history, the guilds and sometimes individual craftsmen held a fair amount of political acumen that could influence social and economic decisions (Kieser, 1989). During the industrial revolution in the UK and Europe, the Arts and Crafts movement was engaged in debates on the quality and value of art and labour (e.g. Crawford 1997, Stankiewicz, 1992). In the twentieth century (and not only), craft has contributed to questions of divisions of labour (Crawford 2009), gender roles (Hackney, 2013), and consumerism e.g. through the slow movement (Garber 2013) and digital platforms such as etsy.com, and through debates on digitalisation and craft identity (Luckman 2013). Furthermore, crafts contribute on many social and cultural levels, relating to health and wellbeing (Riley, Corkhill and Morris, 2013, Tzanidaki and Reynolds, 2011), environmental sustainability (Yair 2010; Fletcher 2014), social re-integration (Walker et al 2018) and craft activism, (or craftivism) as exemplified by the Pussyhat in the 2017 Women's March on Washington (Black 2017).

This indicates that craft has a much broader and penetrating reach on issues of our political, social and cultural life than it is often credited for. Issue 9.1 brings together a number of contributions, which elicit and celebrate this hidden strength of craft: the politics of craft.

Kowolik explores the political nature of craft. He distinguishes notions of the 'conservative' and 'reactive' in politics and how they appear in craft. He argues that conservatism in crafts is an inherent and beneficial characteristic, while he condemns reactionism. Melo also looks at the political nature of craft, but from the point of discrimination in the everyday. She draws parallels between the occurrence of racism and craft in everyday actions, and explores the notion of racism through a macramé wall hanging, which is augmented with virtual reality using digital codes. McLaren has reviewed Burrison's book on *Global Ceramics*, which is richly furnished with illustrations and anecdotes, and which highlights the tensions between national and global perspectives through the politics of curating craft.

Moving from the political reality of craft, to the politics of making, Bernabei and Power explore the relationship between traditional and digital craft. They investigate how the crafting process is being redefined across interior design disciplines through the use of additive manufacturing technologies, leading to interior products imbued with new hybrid, material qualities. Chittenden also explores digital craft. Her aim is to understand how digital making can be manipulated to preserve the maker's relationship with, and their 'imprint' on the work. Her research looks at the example of digital manufacture of ceramics, using human breath and blowing to manipulate the digitally produced output. Many of the questions raised by both these articles are further contextualized by Clifton-Cunningham's review of *Out of Hand: Materializing the Digital*, exhibited at the Powerhouse Museum of Applied Art and Sciences, Sydney (Sept 2016- June 2017). Many of the artefacts on show within seven thematic sections incorporating art, medicine, architecture, fashion and textiles, and product design, demonstrated how the balance between traditional and digital craftsmanship has been considered, and how new collective practices and material aesthetics are becoming validated.

In a similar vein, the *Intersections: Collaborations in Textile Practice* conference and exhibition, held at Loughborough University's London campus in September 2017, surveyed the role of textile craft techniques and approaches in an era of increasingly dominant digital practices. Shercliff's review discusses how the event offered a forum for sharing cross- and inter-disciplinary collaborative research practices, providing insights into the current breadth of co-creative practices undertaken with partners both inside and outside the academy; from developing new knotted structures based on mathematical formulae to reviving ancient Portuguese weave traditions for shoe manufacturing. As this work illustrated, the regeneration and preservation of crafts often requires the rediscovery of forgotten techniques and skills. Based on historical examples, Gill's article investigates this issue through 'learning by doing' how to replicate a set of rare thread-wrapped coat buttons using a pattern, which has previously been undocumented. The article reveals how the craft of the conservator is not simply a case of 're-making' but of reimagining aspects of an artefact in relation to its original function in a different historical context. In the *Maker's Review*, Cecilia Heffer discusses her textile-based practice informed and inspired by the technical complexity and elusive nature of hand embroidered lace, historically referred to in Italian as "punto en aire", (trans: stitches in the air). Heffer explores this premise through her own interpretations of lace-like structures, imagined as contemporary markers that recognize the 'poetry of the common place', present in past and future making environments (Gellatly 2008).

The importance of craft practice, not only for the preservation of cultural heritage, but for the self-realisation of the maker through making is encased in two articles. Stalp, Gardener and Beaird discuss the need for younger women to be able to assert themselves and find acceptance when pursuing handicraft work. This requires for example, resisting consumer culture, negotiating time and space, and defending their choices of handcrafting 'roots' (Twigger Holroyd in Walker et al 2018) as young

women. It also requires creativity to understand and develop both traditional and new ways of learning and crafting.

Price and Morse's research has further investigated the relationship of craft, healthy ageing and social engagement. They found that healthy aging is promoted by creative craft activity, especially in social contexts, and that it can lead to the development of identity, feelings of spirituality and calm as well as mastery and recognition from others. The research builds on previous findings made between craft practice (in the form of knitting) and personal and social wellbeing in adulthood (Riley et al 2013). Knitting is also the focus of Sadkowska and Walker's exhibition review, *Units of Possibility: The Re-Knit Revolution*, staged at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum by Amy Twigger Holroyd in 2017. The exhibition included different examples of re-knitted garments, but significantly, workshops where amateur knitters from the local community could learn and practice this skilled approach to upcycling old, unfashionable or damaged knitwear. Here the simultaneous act of re-knitting and conserving an otherwise potentially disposable item of clothing provides another example of how the 'quiet activism' of domestic making (Hackney 2013) has the potential to undermine the prevailing fast fashion system.

Our authors for Issue 9.1 lead the reader through a kaleidoscope of political perspectives on craft and their varying social, cultural and environmental impacts. They highlight that such impacts can be achieved through what can often be perceived as small, ordinary actions and interactions in our everyday lives, but that such 'material agency' (Malafouris 2013: 119) can create bigger waves within culture. It is therefore the responsibility of everyone involved in and with craft to consider their actions to help craft a better and more considerate world.

A word of thanks

We are delighted to present Volume 9.1 of *Craft Research*. As always, many people have been involved in the realisation of this issue. We wish to thank all our contributors, as well as those authors whose submissions we regrettably had to turn away. Our gratitude also extends to all our advisors as well as to our reviewers for their excellent work. Their constructive advice and feedback to authors is an essential part in fulfilling the developmental role of the journal and in advancing the field. We further wish to thank Intellect Publishers for their continued support for the journal, in particular our journal's manager, Bethan Ball, and her team.

Kristina Niedderer and Katherine Townsend
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